

90

AMERICAN LABOR FACES THE FUTURE

The Problems of Trade Unionism in the Light
Of the San Francisco General Strike

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Letter of William Green to
Charles S. Zimmerman

Reply of Charles S. Zimmerman
to William Green

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DRESSMAKERS UNION LOCAL 22
I.L.G.W.U.

232 West 40th STREET
New York City

FOREWORD

The American labor movement is today at the crossroads. It has grown tremendously in the last year, in numbers, in fighting power and in militant spirit. It has spread its organization to fields where unionism had only the slightest foothold before. Its new-found spirit is being manifested in some of the greatest strikes in American labor history.

On the other hand, the obstacles in the way of labor are multiplying and, along with them, also its problems. Company unionism has suddenly developed into a grave menace to legitimate labor organization, while even from the NRA, which many union officials once hailed as the "great charter of labor," we have learned to expect hardly more than vague promises masking underhand opposition. The textile workers could tell an instructive tale about how the NRA has functioned in their industry, about how the code authorities and NRA officials, including General Johnson, have frankly revealed themselves as spokesmen of the employers and champions of scabs and strike-breakers! The forces of the organized employers have launched a determined drive to slash wages, lengthen hours and worsen conditions of labor, a drive not only to stem the tide of unionism in the future but even to wipe out every trace of it wherever it has already succeeded in establishing itself.

In the light of this whole situation, the great problems facing organized labor become particularly vital and immediate. These problems touch attitude to the NRA and the employers, tactics and methods of labor struggle, form of organization and union structure, ways and means of assimilating the hundreds of thousands of new members into the body of unionism. The future of the American labor movement depends, to a very great extent, upon how realistically and how effectively these basic problems are met.

Apart from the dual unionists who have, by their own act, divorced themselves from organized labor, there are today two distinct fundamental tendencies in the American labor movement—the conservative and the progressive. Their answers to the problems facing unionism at this critical moment are widely different and the programs they propose

APR 21 1948

Leon Kramer L. 50 - Sec.

far apart. It is up to the millions of members of the American Federation of Labor themselves to decide which program corresponds with their best interests and holds out the most for the future.

The recent general strike in San Francisco revealed dramatically this deep-seated difference of viewpoint between conservative and progressive unionism. Because of the very magnitude and sharpness of the struggle, the basic issues appeared in particularly clear form. It was therefore natural that the widely featured declaration of President Green on the San Francisco strike, a faithful reflection of the conservative standpoint, should be sharply challenged by the spokesmen of the progressive tendency. Dressmakers Union Local 22, I.L.G.W.U., an organization of over 30,000 members, has long been an outstanding champion of progressivism in the organized labor movement and it was from the head of this union, Charles S. Zimmerman, its manager, that the challenge to Brother Green's pronouncement came in the form of a statement issued on July 20. To this Brother Green replied in a letter addressed to Brother Zimmerman and, as a rejoinder, the latter answered in an extensive communication treating the questions involved in detail and proposing, in conclusion, a concrete program of action for labor in its present situation. That this letter is not simply an expression of personal opinion is to be seen from the fact that it was unanimously endorsed by the executive board of Local 22.

Together, these two letters form an instructive survey of the big problems facing organized labor today and of the ways in which conservative and progressive unionism propose to meet and solve them. A study of these documents, we feel, will contribute greatly to the clarification of opinion so necessary today in the labor movement. With the hope that this purpose will be served, we publish them in printed form.

LETTER OF WILLIAM GREEN TO CHARLES S. ZIMMERMAN

Washington, D. C., August 2, 1934.

Mr. Charles S. Zimmerman, Vice President,
International Ladies' Garment Workers Union,
New York, New York.

Dear Sir:

The statement which you gave to the capitalistic press on Sunday morning, July 22nd, shows that you are still the same Zimmerman who opposed the late Morris Sigman in his efforts to promote the economic welfare of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union some few years ago. Evidently, you have not changed. You were reported to be an avowed Communist then and your statements, your utterances and your actions lead to the belief that you are a Communist now.

There is a distinguishing difference between your attitude and that of the leaders of the American Federation of Labor. They believe in Trade-Unionism, collective bargaining, the making of wage agreements and the observance of them. You laud a policy of the workers which means destruction to their organization, the abrogation and repudiation of agreements and the pursuit of a policy which the records of history show has always led the workers to inevitable defeat. The American Federation of Labor cannot remain passive or indifferent when a group of workers, locally situated, engage in an economic conflict which means ruin and destruction.

The facts are that serious consequences are involved in sympathetic strikes. Those who believe in the over-throw of government will favor sympathetic strikes. I say this because of the fact that no sympathetic strike can be won unless you succeed in defeating the Government.

The general sympathetic strike which occurred in Great Britain a few years ago was launched under the most favorable circumstances. It was sponsored and ordered by the British Trade-Union Congress. It occurred in a nation where the workers were thoroughly organized. The strike was launched in support of the miners who had been on strike for the redress of grievances. The strike failed and the British Trade-Union movement received a blow from which it has not yet recovered and the Miners' organization was almost destroyed.

The American Federation of Labor believes in collective bargaining, in the making of contracts. It favors strikes when strikes are necessary on the part of the workers to enable them to enjoy the right to engage in the negotiation of wage agreements. If the Officers and Members of the American Federation of Labor enjoy collective bargaining and make wage agreements they must abrogate those agreements if they engage in sympathetic strikes. Those who engage in sympathetic strikes abrogate agreements and thus prevent the American Federation of Labor from organizing the unorganized. Every sympathetic strike undertaken, so far as historic records show, was lost and the workers suffered set-backs costly and distressing in character.

I am making this reference to your newspaper article because I want you to know I resent what you stated therein.

In this expression of your personal opinion you did not convey the true spirit and letter of the policies which govern the American Federation of Labor. On the contrary, your remarks were subversive and malicious.

Sincerely yours,
(Signed) WM. GREEN,
President,
American Federation of Labor.

REPLY OF CHARLES S. ZIMMERMAN TO WILLIAM GREEN

(Approved unanimously by the executive board of
Dressmakers Union Local 22, I.L.G.W.U.)

August 14, 1934

William Green, President,
American Federation of Labor,
Ambassador Hotel,
Atlantic City, N. J.

Dear Sir and Brother:

The questions raised in your letter of August 2 are certainly of paramount importance to the whole labor movement. As such, I feel they should be discussed in a calm and constructive manner without allowing any personalities or the spirit of recrimination to creep in.

It is not at all a question of what my personal political views may be. It is far more a question of what philosophy, outlook and tactics the American labor movement must adopt if it is to grow strong and fulfill its great mission on behalf of the working people of this country.

I take my stand firmly upon the great principle so clearly enunciated in the original preamble adopted by the American Federation of Labor:

"A struggle is going on in all nations of the civilized world between the oppressors and the oppressed, a struggle between the capitalist and the laborer, which grows in intensity from year to year, and will work disastrous results to the toiling millions if they are not combined for mutual protection and benefits."

The mission of trade unionism is to defend and advance the economic interests of the workers as against the employers. Such institutions as "collective bargaining, the making of wage agreements and the observance of them," to which you refer, are only means to this supreme end. They are there to serve labor and not labor to serve them.

Organized labor can achieve nothing for which it is not ready, willing and able to fight. It is not merely a question of striking "to enjoy the right to engage in the negotiation of wage agreements," as you state. It is rather a question of striking or being ready to strike for every wage increase, for every reduction of hours, for every general improvement in conditions. Unceasing vigilance and unwavering militancy are watchwords of organized labor.

Have not these tried and tested principles been fully justified by the recent experience of the labor movement? Where trade unions have placed their reliance upon the "good will" or "reasonableness" of the employers or upon the NRA to shower blessings upon them, have they not met with disaster? But where unions have relied upon their own organized might and militancy, have they not made great headway, built up their organizations and improved the conditions of the workers in their trades?

Is not this the philosophy underlying the American trade union movement? It certainly appears to me to be the only philosophy on the basis of which labor has made headway in the past and can continue to do so in the future.

Your attitude to general and sympathetic strikes, and especially your utterances on the San Francisco strike, appear to me to be greatly at variance with the true purpose and spirit of unionism. It is not a question of the timeliness or advisability of this or that general or sympathetic strike. On this there may, of course, be wide differences of opinion. But you place yourself in opposition to all general

or sympathetic strikes, of any sort, at any time, upon any occasion. You oppose them on principle, on a principle which, I believe, is quite foreign to the real principles of the labor movement.

You oppose general and sympathetic strikes first because they involve the breaking of collective agreements and contracts. But to elevate the sanctity of contracts with the employers to such a point as to tie the hands of the workers and deprive them of a powerful weapon in their own defense, is surely to lose complete sight of the great end and aim of the labor movement. The working people form one great army constantly arrayed against the hosts of capital and it would be the sheerest folly and lack of ordinary common sense and union loyalty for one section to refuse to come to the aid of another, where such aid is possible and practicable, merely because it has a contract with the employers. The employers themselves are not influenced by any such fine scruples. They are always ready to rush to each other's aid against the workers. We on our part must learn the lesson of labor solidarity. Noting the inspiring response of the rank and file of American unionism in support of the San Francisco general strike, I am glad to say that labor appears to have a keen feeling of its duties and responsibilities in this field.

May I call your attention to the fact that this alleged principle of absolute and unconditional sanctity of contracts with the employers would lead in actual practise to the most shocking cases of mutual scabbing and strikebreaking on the part of groups of unionists who work in the same factories but belong to different craft unions? Surely you will agree that such practices could not be tolerated no matter what the abstract principle may be. The unity, solidarity and welfare of labor must be the highest law!

Do general or sympathetic strikes, because they lead to the abrogation of contracts, "prevent the American Federation of Labor from organizing the unorganized," as you contend? I think not. Organizing the unorganized is not a matter of gaining the confidence and good will of the employers, as you seem to imply, but rather of winning the confidence and loyalty of the unorganized workers themselves. Will not these masses of the unorganized be won to the trade unions more easily if they come to understand that the whole labor movement is ready to stand behind them once they are in its ranks, is ready to back them to the limit where necessary and possible? All experience has shown that the appeal of labor solidarity is the most powerful instrument in awakening the backward, unorganized workers to the necessity of genuine unionism.

Your final argument is that general or sympathetic strikes are no longer directed against a particular group of employers but are immediately transformed into a clash with the government. "No sympathetic strike," you maintain, "can be won unless you succeed in defeating the government." And this, you say, is impossible—"the government must be supreme." Hence all general or sympathetic strikes are doomed to failure in advance. But don't you realize that this argument, if valid, would condemn almost any strike that ever took place to inevitable failure? No matter how limited its scope or its aims may be, practically every strike comes into direct conflict with the government once it becomes formidable enough, since the government immediately throws in its forces to help the employers. Every page of American labor history testifies to this notorious fact and every worker knows it by heart. No important strike was ever won except by defeating the whole array of governmental forces, police, courts, militia, acting as strikebreakers. The truck drivers in Minneapolis are not out in general strike now; they are merely engaged in a

limited economic strike. And yet the national guard is raiding strike halls, arresting strike leaders, dispersing strike pickets, breaking the strike all around. The Minneapolis truckers have come into conflict with the government. What shall they do? Surrender because "the government must be supreme?" Or fight on, realizing they must defeat the government if they are to win their strike?

If "the government must be supreme" no matter what side it takes in a labor conflict, how about the time-honored official A. F. of L. policy of defying and resisting court injunctions aimed at labor? It does not seem that American labor always held to this curious dogma that once the government steps in on the side of the employers, everything is lost and only surrender is possible.

Contrary to your contentions, general strikes have been successful in the past, either partially or wholly. I need only mention the Swedish strike of 1902, or the Belgian strike of 1913, or the German strike of 1920. I might recall the significant fact that in this very country the Adamson eight-hour law for railroad workers was won only thru the threat of a general strike thrown by American labor into the very face of the government. Nor does the failure of the British general strike in 1926 or, for that matter, of the recent San Francisco general strike, provide any argument against the efficacy of the general strike as a weapon of labor. Neither was actually defeated or smashed. Both were undermined and called off by timid and narrow-visioned leaders who, as a matter of fact, had been without confidence in the strike from the very beginning and had acquiesced only because of the insistent demand of the rank and file. A battle that is lost because the generals, having undertaken it against their will, surrender as soon as possible is surely no test of anything except of the calibre and trustworthiness of the generals!

But the criticism I have of your utterances in connection with the San Francisco strike goes deeper than mere disagreement with your contentions. By implication, you reproach me for having issued my criticism of your statement of July 18 to the capitalistic press. May I merely call your attention to the fact that your statement attacking not merely an individual labor leader but the whole labor movement of San Francisco had been issued by you to this very same capitalistic press a few days before?

Suppose that you were right in your belief that this particular strike was uncalled for and utterly inadvisable. Suppose even that you were right in your belief that all general strikes are undesirable and futile. The fact remains nevertheless, that the strike was there anyway, authorized and participated in by the whole bonafide labor movement of San Francisco, by all A. F. of L. unions. The workers were fighting with their backs to the wall against the combined hosts of the employers. Great consequences for the whole labor movement hinged upon the issue of this struggle. Did not the most obvious considerations of union loyalty decree that, while the battle was on, the ranks of labor must stand solid in support of the struggle, reserving for a later occasion a discussion of such general controversial issues as to whether the fight was worth-while or timely or wise? But at the most critical point of the struggle, you issued a statement to the capitalistic press disavowing the strike in the name of the A. F. of L. and practically repudiating it. Was this conduct worthy of the head of the A. F. of L.? Is it not true that your statement, spread from coast to coast by all the publicity agencies at the command of the employers, helped materially to demoralize and dishearten the strikers and to confuse labor generally, thus giving the San Francisco employers and the open shoppers and union-smashers everywhere a weapon against the

workers? In this situation, I felt it my obvious duty to let the labor movement and especially the San Francisco workers know that your attitude was not representative of the whole American Federation of Labor, that there were those in the A. F. of L. who had not lost all sense of responsibility to their fellow-workers in their most critical hour.

The issues raised in your letter and in this answer of mine are of the most vital consequence to American labor. The trade union movement today stands at the cross roads. The gravest problems face it as a result of the situation created by the NRA. The policies of class collaboration, of so-called peaceful partnership between employer and worker, which took such hold in the years before the crisis, are now admittedly bankrupt. They have shown that they can lead labor to nothing but disaster and defeat. Today a new spirit is spreading in the ranks of the labor movement, a new understanding of the necessity of aggressiveness, militancy and organizational power. It is this new spirit which holds the promise of the future for the labor movement. The great need of the day, in my opinion, is for the official philosophy, methods and tactics of the American Federation of Labor to be brought into line with this new spirit of progressivism and militancy.

The labor movement is now facing hostile attacks from all sides. The employing class of this country, especially in the basic industries, is determined not merely to stem the spread of unionism but even to destroy whatever progress labor has already made. Company unionism is being feverishly promoted by the big trusts and business concerns with this aim in mind. The rights supposed to be guaranteed to labor by Section 7a are no more than a scrap of paper in the most important branches of American industry. To an alarming extent even the right to strike or to picket is being challenged. Proposals for the police to license or register

labor leaders are being raised in many quarters. Only a firm and aggressive policy can hope to defeat these attacks on our movement.

In view of this situation, may I take this occasion to present for your consideration and the consideration of the executive council some suggestions for a program to enable the trade union movement to meet the very serious situation facing it today.

1. From the experience of the last year and a half, I believe we have learned the great lesson that labor can get nothing under the NRA unless it stands ready to fight for it, unless it stands ready to strike and strike hard. The American Federation of Labor should issue a clear call pointing this out as the only way in the present critical situation. The American Federation of Labor, too, should take the lead in stimulating a nation-wide strike movement to achieve union recognition, a rise in wages to meet the rising cost of living and to increase buying power, the shortening of hours to allow for real reemployment, etc. The sentiment of the masses of workers is ripe for such a move and it would bring lasting benefit to the labor movement.

2. The American Federation of Labor must entrench itself in the basic, mass production industries of this country. The opportunity to unionize these industries is here today, as we all know, but if we pass up this opportunity now, we may have to pay very dearly for it in the future. The coming convention of the American Federation of Labor should seriously consider the launching of a big nation-wide drive to organize these basic industries.

3. The great advantages of the industrial form of organization are now generally recognized. I would suggest that the next convention lay it down as a rule that all future organization, in the mass production industries especially,

be along industrial lines. The executive council, furthermore, should be authorized to consider ways and means of amalgamating the existing craft organizations into industrial unions.

4. The A. F. of L. has done a very good service in recent months in directing public attention to the monstrous evil of company unionism. This menace is growing graver every day and labor must make ready for a war to the death against it, without quarter or compromise. Labor should now prepare for a supreme effort and concentrate all forces to smash this challenge to genuine unionism, before it grows too big to be tackled. The coming convention should issue the call for such a grand campaign. The A. F. of L. should also make clear that it will not tolerate any attempt to recognize company unions as in any sense legitimate agencies of collective bargaining.

5. Never was the need for the trade union movement to preserve its complete independence from the employers and from the government as great as today. Powerful forces high in the councils of the NRA are trying to effect plans for government supervision of the unions and there are others who would like the unions to enter into some sort of alleged "partnership" relation with industry, forgetting that the unions are there primarily to defend labor against industry. The A. F. of L. convention should make clear that American labor will not tolerate either of these schemes to undermine its independence and fighting power.

6. In view of the notable and very welcome growth of the A. F. of L. in the last year and a half, it is generally recognized that the executive council should be enlarged to include representatives of some of the big international unions. It would be well, too, if this step were the signal for the adoption of measures to ensure greater democracy

and membership control in a number of unions affiliated with the A. F. of L. Especially should the trade unions be kept open to all workers without regard to political views or affiliation.

7. In order to absorb the many hundreds of thousands of new members and to keep them in our movement, an effective program of progressive labor education should be put into operation in the international unions as well as in the federal labor unions. The regulations of many unions will have to be considerably liberalized, also, if these new members are to find their proper place in the service of the trade union movement.

8. The hooligan outrages of the San Francisco vigilante bands upon labor organizations and institutions of that city, should be a timely warning to us. From Italy, Germany and Austria, we learn that the Fascist campaigns of extermination against the trade unions were always prepared in advance by just such hooligan attacks upon sections of the labor movement under pretext of alleged political views. The same tactics have been employed time and again by the open shoppers on the Pacific Coast. We must not allow ourselves to be duped by this camouflage. We must beat back these attacks on labor before they overwhelm us.

9. That the two dominant political parties of this country are controlled body and soul by the employing class, that both show themselves indifferent and even bitterly hostile to labor once they are in power, is only too clear from the events of the last few decades of our history. The official "non-partisan" policy of the American Federation of Labor has brought us no good; it has, in fact, merely shunted off the political influence of labor into futile and self-defeating channels. A large number of local unions and city and state labor federations, as well as many international

unions have already come to realize this and have therefore declared themselves in favor of a new departure in labor political policy, in favor of an independent labor party, embracing the trade unions and other workers organizations. The coming convention of the A. F. of L. would do well, I think, to adopt this viewpoint and sound a call for labor to declare its political independence by breaking with the two old parties and setting up an independent party of labor.

These suggestions, I believe, would find ready acclaim among hundreds of thousands of the members of the American Federation of Labor. May I hope that you will place them before the executive council for consideration?

Fraternally yours,

(Signed) CHARLES S. ZIMMERMAN

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